

GCKN RUNNING ESTIMATE

July 2022 — Update 5



In the Previous Running Estimate...

- *Russian public opinion remained steady from March to April 2022; however, the persistence of the conflict—despite initial Russian expectation of a quick victory—may eventually lower support for Putin and his invasion in the long-term, invalidating the Kremlin’s aggressive posturing.*
- *Moldova, Romania, and Bulgaria are experiencing a range of different consequences from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Moldova is the least capable of countering potential Russian escalation of the war. Romania could reduce Russia’s energy dominance in Europe but will likely suffer significant Russian backlash. Bulgaria will struggle to counter societal divisions over the war while continuing to support Ukraine.*

This Running Estimate...

- *Russian public opinion of President Putin’s Ukraine invasion dropped by 8% over a roughly three-month period, peaking at 83% in March and declining to 75% in June.*
- *Russia’s military continues to face demographic stresses impacting force generation and logistics. Morale issues, among conscription-age males (ages 18 to 28), are a key contributor. Notably, this demographic shows the least support for the War in Ukraine.*

DOMESTIC RUSSIAN PERCEPTIONS

Domestic Russian support for the Ukrainian invasion appears to be receding despite the Kremlin’s persistent campaign to bolster public perceptions of its actions in the war-torn country. Since Russia began its so-called “special military operation” in Ukraine on 24 February, public support for the invasion has been consistently high, peaking at 83% in March. Support dropped to 77% in May and slipped again to 75% in June with the share of critical respondents slightly increasing.¹ Support continues to drop while Russians have become more concerned about NATO’s capabilities.²

- On 2 June, the Levada Center released results from its 4th poll since the beginning of the Ukraine conflict.^a Support for Russia’s “special military operation” in Ukraine

remained high at 77%, however, this is the first significant decrease since March (83%) and April (82%).³ The Center’s polling update for June showed a further decrease to 75% with support greatest among older Russians (above 55) and lowest among ages 18-24.⁴

- The number of respondents who believe the “special military operation” is succeeding increased from 68% in April to 73% in May, possibly indicating the effectiveness of Russian propaganda in portraying the Kremlin’s actions positively. In the same poll, the share of Russians who hold a negative view of NATO increased from 78% in March to 82% in May, with older Russians above 55 years being the most negative (96%) and Russians aged 18-24 years the least negative (84%).⁵

a This poll was conducted from May 26 to May 29.



- Support for the invasion is significantly lower among Muscovites^b (66%) than the national average (75%), according to a separate survey. Muscovites have a distinct cosmopolitan identity that is more open to Western culture—food, popular culture, fashion, etc.—and is better integrated into the global capitalist system than the rest of Russia.⁶ *Muscovites may become more critical of the invasion as Western sanctions bite harder.*

b Muscovites refers to people residing in Moscow.

Most Russians (60%) fear NATO compared to the 48% who feared the alliance in 2021.⁷ ***Over half of Russians fear war with NATO, likely indicating they are tracking Western arms support to Ukraine as Russian forces endure significant losses in fights for small territorial gains.***⁸

PERCEPTIONS IMPACTING RECRUITMENT

Younger Russians continue to fear mobilization and the deployment of conscripts into combat, despite official statements and policies to the contrary. The Kremlin has increased its enforcement against draft-dodging among conscript-aged youth, but it has still not called for a general mobilization. *A general mobilization would contradict the narrative of a “special military operation” with limited costs or concerns to the Russian population, and could exacerbate any societal pushback already present.*⁹

- As the Ukraine conflict persists and casualties mount, Russian Gen Z and Millennials ages 18-27 are increasingly apprehensive about mandatory military conscription. Russian males in this demographic are particularly concerned that the Kremlin will order their compulsory military service and prevent them from leaving the country, according to international reporting.¹⁰ In the early months of the war, fear of conscription drove many Millennials and Gen Z to flee abroad.¹¹
- Despite assurances from Russian Minister of Defense Sergey Shoigu that new conscripts would not be “sent to front lines” or “hot spots,” there are multiple indications Russia has deployed new conscripts into the Ukraine conflict. In April, the British MoD assessed Russia was considering mobilizing conscript forces to fight in Ukraine. In the same month, some Russian POWs claimed they were conscripted, and multiple Russian women have reported their conscript sons are fighting or have been killed.¹²
- In early June, the Kremlin announced it would review an amendment to the law on military service on 28 June, according to credible Western reporting.¹³ The law would allow military officials to offer contracts to young Russians immediately after they reach the pre-set age or after graduating from high school. However, the proposed amendment would also tighten restrictions on the use of conscripts in combat zones.¹⁴

c See GCKN Running Estimate #3.

The pace and outcome of the next phase of Russian domestic troop recruitment may depend in part on Russia’s ability to reframe its challenges and demonstrate clear and substantial progress on the battlefield. The Kremlin leadership may eventually perceive a need to recast its narrative of the war should demographic stresses increase.

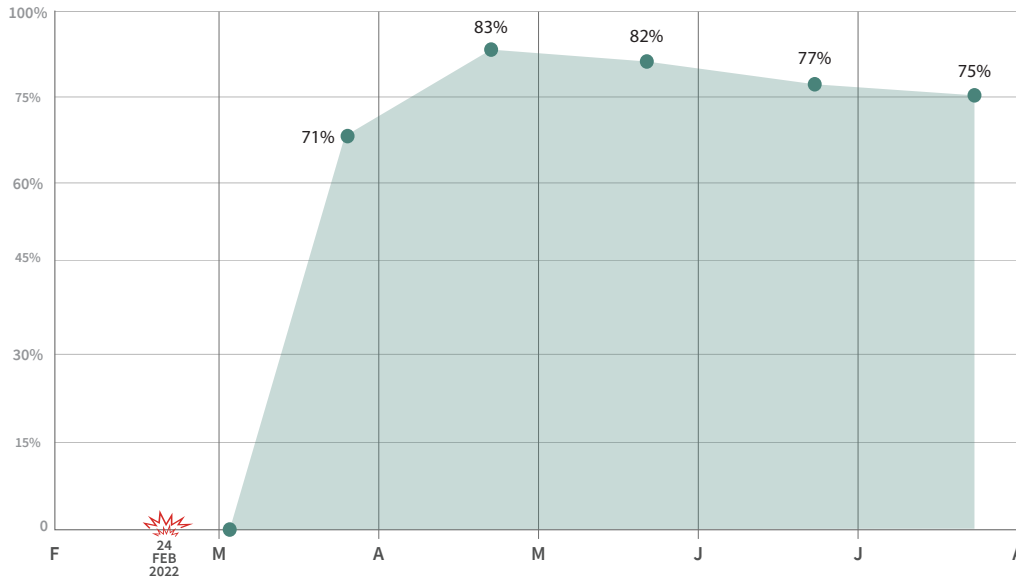
- Extreme Scan polling data from March-May and Russian field surveys indicate that only a third of eligible male adults are willing^d to be conscripted to fight in Ukraine,^{15,e} *possibly indicating that the lack of fidelity between Russian military actions in Ukraine and messaging about the campaign is not spurring the patriotic altruism required to drive enthusiastic recruitment.*
- Only 31% of eligible Russian males are willing to be mobilized for the war in Ukraine, but a third of them are unwilling to serve outside of Russian territory. About a quarter of respondents (26%) who are eligible for military service claim a medical exemption—which would eliminate them from conscription—and more than a quarter of eligible males say they are not ready for mobilization.¹⁶
- Thirty-nine percent of Russian men between the ages of 40 and 49 are willing to fight in Ukraine. Across all ages, willingness to fight is greater (38%) among those who trust Kremlin casualty figures (< 5000 killed) compared to those who believe the low official casualty count is propaganda (20%). Russians who believe the war will last only a few months are more willing to fight in Ukraine (32%) compared to those who believe the war will be long-lasting (20%).¹⁷

d “Willing” is defined as ready, eager, or prepared to do something. These polling results do not necessarily indicate that those who are unwilling will actually refuse or resist, but that they are at best reluctant to serve.

e The polling is consistent with survey results from other organizations, which consistently show that only about 30% of eligible Russian men are willing to participate in the Ukraine conflict. While this number is sufficient to avoid general mobilization, it provides a cautionary note that not all Russians are keen about the war.

Domestic Russian Perceptions of the "Special Military Operation"

Public Opinion Polls in Russia Show Steady and High Support



Leveda: Support for Putin's "special military operation" peaked in March at 83%. Since March, it has gradually declined to 75% support in June.

*It is important to note that Russian opinion polls are immediately instrumentalized by the Kremlin, repeated by the Russian media, and used to claim that the invasion is supported by the Russian public and conducted in its name.

Figure 1. Domestic Russian Perceptions of the "Special Military Operation" public opinion polls, GCKN.

POLLING SNAPSHOT

ANTI-NATO SENTIMENT



MAR 78%
MAY 82%

Half of Russians fear war with NATO

**MUSCOVITE
SUPPORT**

66%

**NATIONAL
SUPPORT**

75%

**WILLINGNESS FOR
MOBILIZATION**
31%



**Russians who trust state media are more willing to fight than those who do not trust.*

- Within a roughly three-month period, **Russian popular support for the War in Ukraine declined by 8%**, from 83% in March to 75% in June.¹⁸
- The **strongest support for the war** continues to be among **those over 55 years old**, while the weakest support is from those of conscription age (18-27).¹⁹
- **Support for the invasion is significantly lower among Muscovites (66%)** than the national average (75%).²⁰
- **Anti-NATO sentiment increased by 4%** from 78% in March to 82% in May, with oldest respondents most negative towards NATO and the youngest respondents the least negative.²¹
- **Half of Russians fear war with NATO.**²²
- **Approximately a third of Russians** eligible for mobilization are **willing to be mobilized.**²³
- Statistics addressing the "willingness to fight in Ukraine if mobilized" are consistent with the overarching demographics of support for the war: **the oldest respondents are most willing to fight** and those of conscription age are the least willing to fight.²⁴
- Russians who **trust state media** are **more willing to fight** in Ukraine than those who do not trust state media.²⁵

Russia's gradual progress in the Donbas, coupled with the Kremlin's ongoing tactics to boost internal military support for its "Special Operation" in Ukraine, has tempered Russia's notably low troop morale during the first few months of the war. In late February, March, and into April, Ukraine's unexpectedly strong resistance and Russia's own military shortcomings contributed to an unstable level of support among many of Russia's troops. In response, the Kremlin used aggressive tactics, including the promulgation of the 'fake' news law,²⁶ to discourage critical reporting of the war and spread disinformation to boost troop morale.²⁷

- In February and March, several Russian units "mutinied" against the war, and a significant number of Russian soldiers deserted, surrendered, sabotaged their equipment, or even wounded themselves to be evacuated from the combat zone, according to Western and Ukrainian reporting.²⁸ In mid-April, the Conflict Intelligence Team, a (banned) Russian NGO, claimed that opposition was becoming systemic as every Russian military unit that returned from fighting in Ukraine included soldiers who had refused to fight.²⁹ The NGO estimated the number of dissenters to be 20-40% of the contract servicemen that returned from Ukraine and who were being readied to go back into combat.³⁰ Corroborating videos and transcripts of Russian POWs, expressing remorse and opposition to the war, can be found in social media.³¹
- According to Western military sources, training and readiness concerns have been creating demographic stresses for the Russian military. In May, training was identified as a significant weakness in the Russian operation, even for units that had nearly a year to prepare for combat.³² Similar reporting suggests that Russian ground and airborne units have lacked the leadership to rapidly expand their forces.³³
- Since the subsequent consolidation of Russian forces in the Donbas in late April, there have been fewer reports of such problems within the Russian ranks,³⁴ **suggesting that morale challenges have begun to subside.** Over the last couple of months, there has been only limited evidence of notable Russian troop dissent. According to credible reporting, the Russian military's improved performance³⁵ is likely beginning to bolster troop morale.

KREMLIN MEDIA INFLUENCE

The pro-Kremlin media's overwhelmingly positive portrayal of Russia's "Special Military Operation" has effectively built high levels of internal support for Putin and his decisions regarding Ukraine. Over the past five months, the Kremlin's 24/7 media leviathan has been able to transform any tragedy (e.g., Bucha, withdrawal from Kyiv, sinking of the Moskva) into a glorious achievement. This rosy depiction of moving "from strength to strength" is consumed not only by the average Russian, but also by those in uniform. There has been an almost complete absence of any doubt, disappointment or concern within the pro-Kremlin and/or Russian state media apparatus. Some may suspect otherwise, but they are keeping their thoughts to themselves.³⁶

Despite improvements in Russian troop morale since April, the persistence of demonstrated weaknesses in command, logistics, training, and medical support drive the Kremlin to continually adjust incentives, policies, and tactics to mitigate manpower and morale issues. The Kremlin is using several approaches to bolster its on-the-ground personnel strength, including increasing the age requirement for contract soldiers, offering them bigger incentives, relaxing medical standards, recruiting foreigners and those serving prison sentences, and ignoring criminal records.³⁷

- As of May, Russia employed private military companies (PMCs), proxy militias, and reserve troops in Ukraine to make up for the high troop attrition, according to international press. Russian PMCs have formed combined units with airborne elements to make up for troop losses and the diminishing reservist pool, according to the Institute for the Study of War.³⁸ In the same month, there were rumors that Russia had begun withdrawing its forces from Syria and was concentrating them at three airports before moving part of the contingent to Ukraine.³⁹

- While Russia has leveraged ethnic units from the Caucasus, this has been one of the least effective mitigation strategies. For example, May reporting explains that soldiers from South Ossetia, a Russian-backed breakaway region in Georgia, were used in the early weeks of the war, but that a lack of weapons, ammunition, and intelligence, as well as poor leadership, has created challenges in recruiting and retaining troops from that area.⁴⁰ However,

on 27 June, Chechnya leader Ramzan Kadyrov announced the imminent formation of four battalions of exclusively young Chechens for the Russian Ministry of Defense.⁴¹ Establishing ethnic minority formations for the Russian army is a traditional way of raising forces that goes back to Imperial Russia. Some have been useful augmentations, while others have not.

RUSSIA'S CONSCRIPT AND CONTRACT SOLDIERS

Russia's Ministry of Defense will conduct a fall conscript campaign (October through December) that will likely result in another approximately 135,000 men in addition to the annual spring conscription campaign, which had a goal of 134,500.⁴²

All Russian men between 18 and 27 must serve one year in the military (note: conscription is two years for the Navy). Russians of conscription age form the smallest subsection of the Russian population (see Figure 2). However, some individuals do civil service instead, and many--especially in Moscow and other big cities--receive deferments for health or schooling. This results in the majority of conscripts coming from rural Russia, which could contribute to a rural-urban divide in Russian society.⁴³

The ongoing modernization of the Russian military includes increasing the number of volunteer contract soldiers: Of a total force of ~1 million, approximately 400k are contract soldiers. To raise this number in the face of an ongoing war and increasing publicly reported casualty figures, the Kremlin has offered higher pay, relaxed age and medical standards, and has actively recruited foreigners.⁴⁴ *Without significant battlefield success, the Kremlin's effort to grow its contract recruiting may face increasing difficulties, placing further strain on existing troops.*

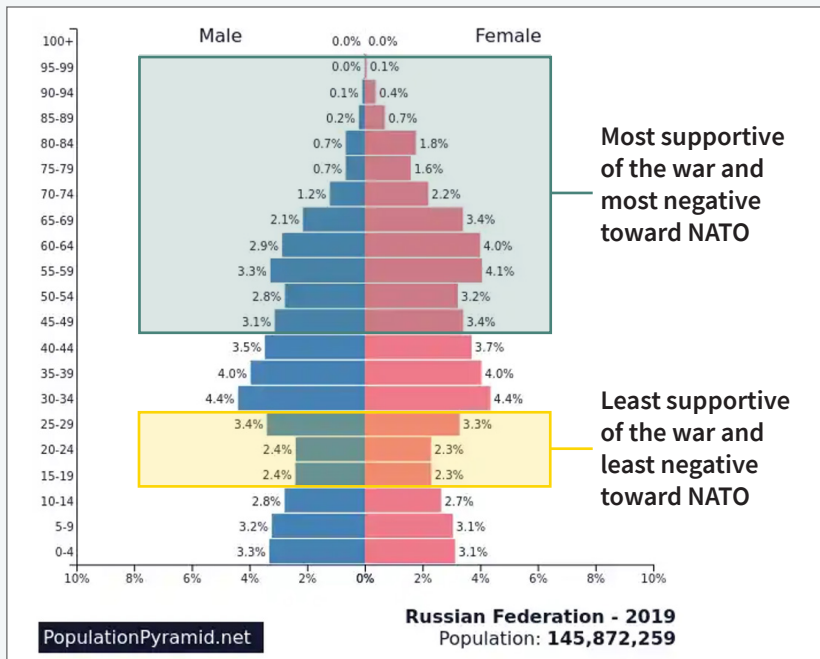


Figure 2. Russian Federation-2020 Population Pyramid, <https://www.populationpyramid.net/russian-federation/2019/>

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ENDNOTES

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Image Content

Figure 1. Susan Littleton, *Domestic Russian Perceptions of the "Special Military Operation"* public opinion polls, infographic, GCKN, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

Figure 2. *Russian Federation 2019," Population Pyramids of the World form 1950 to 2100*, PopulationPyramid.net, <https://www.populationpyramid.net/russian-federation/2019/>.